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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 000321

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SUBJECT: ODS WINS CZECH EP ELECTIONS DUE TO LOW VOTER TURNOUT, PERSONALITIES

REF: A. 28 MAY 2009 PRAGUE DAILY

1B. 9 JUNE 2009 PRAGUE DAILY

1C. PRAGUE 314

1D. PRAGUE 306

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mary Thompson-Jones, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Four of the Czech Republic's parliamentary parties: the right-of-center Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the left-of-center Social Democratic Party (CSSD), the Communist Party (KSCM) and the Christian Democratic Party (KDU-CSL) obtained seats in the June 5-6 European Parliamentary (EP) elections. Voter turnout was just over 28 percent and mirrored the turnout rate during the country's last and only EP elections in 2004. According to public opinion experts and Czech political analysts, ODS' wider-than-expected margin of victory can be attributed to this low voter turnout and popular personalities on the ODS ticket. The CSSD, which lost a significant lead in public opinion polls over the past few weeks lost the momentum it had gained in the October 2008 senate and regional elections, but still more than doubled its support as compared to 2004. The Green Party suffered a serious defeat, receiving only 2 percent of the vote, prompting party leader and former Deputy PM Martin Bursik to resign. Three far right parties did poorly, with the largest receiving just over one percent, enough to qualify for government funds, but not enough to obtain a seat. Given that turnout for Czech parliamentary elections is traditionally much higher, the results of this EP election should not necessarily be seen as an accurate predictor for the October national elections. The bare-knuckled campaign tactics and the fairly equal dominance of the larger parties, however, are likely to be repeated this fall. End Summary.

FAMILIAR FACES TURN OUT THE VOTE FOR ODS, CSSD RECEIVES DISAPPOINTING VOTE

12. (SBU) According to pollsters and Czech political analysts, qualities and turnout, rather than issues, were key to ODS's victory. ODS, whose candidate roster included a number of well-known and respected personalities, won the elections by a wider margin than expected (10 percent over CSSD), with 31.4 percent of the vote, and maintained its 9 seats in the EP (out of 22 total seats). Evzen Tosenovsky, a very popular former Major of Ostrava and governor of the Moravian-Silesian region, topped the candidate list with nearly 105,000 preferential votes, nearly 39,000 more than the runner up, another ODS candidate Jan Zahradil.

13. (SBU) There was also 6-7 percent higher voter turnout in Prague and other larger Czech cities, where there are traditionally more right-of-center supporters, than in the rural parts of the country. According to post-election data, 35 percent of Prague residents went to the polls, constituting about one-sixth of the total vote. Even so, ODS won every region except for Olomouc.

14. (SBU) The left-of-center Social Democratic Party (CSSD)

came in second, with 22.4 percent of the vote, a significant increase from the 9 percent of the vote it received in 2004, but a let down given the CSSD's landslide victory in the Fall 2008 Senate and local elections. Nonetheless, the party increased its seat total in the EP to end with 7 seats overall.

¶ 15. (SBU) The Communists took approximately 14.2 percent of the vote, compared to 20.3 percent in 2004, losing 2 of their 6 seats. The Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL) - part of former PM Topolanek's coalition - held on to their 2 seats in the EP, despite a rift in the party. This can likely be attributed to a constant support base in the catholic community and a change in leadership (KDU recently voted out the controversial incumbent party leader Jiri Cunek and elected a new Chairman, Cyril Svoboda).

SMALL PARTIES HAVE POOR EP SHOWING

¶ 16. (SBU) The smaller parties running in the EP elections won almost 25 percent of the vote, but failed to win any seats because none of them met the 5 percent threshold for EP Parliamentary representation. There were three Green parties on the ticket and the former coalition partner, Green Party (SZ) received only 2 percent of the vote. SZ' humiliating loss was likely caused by the party split in March 2009. After the election Green Party Chairman and former Minister of the Environment Martin Bursik resigned, leaving the party in shambles with no strong leadership.

¶ 17. (SBU) It was also a disappointing weekend for President Vaclav Klaus, whose right-wing Euroskeptic allies failed to

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make the cut. Of the three Euroskeptic parties: Sovereignty, the Czech branch of Libertas, and the Free Citizen's Party, Sovereignty was the only party to come close to gaining a seat, receiving 4.26 percent of the vote thanks to the leadership of popular Euroskeptic former MEP Jana Bobosikova.

Klaus never officially voiced his support for any of the parties, claiming the elections were "pointless."

EXTREMISTS GARNER JUST ONE PERCENT

¶ 18. (SBU) Although the three right-wing extremist parties competing in the elections all did poorly, the most well-known of the three, the Worker's Party won just over 1 percent of the vote, qualifying it for government funding.

THE CZECHS IN THE EU

¶ 19. (SBU) ODS announced its plans to leave the European People's Party (EPP) faction in the EP and join British conservative party leader David Cameron's more Euroskeptic and Transatlantic faction. According to Czech political analysts, the Czech cohort could lose some influence within the EP by aiding in the internal split of the EPP.

THE OCTOBER NATIONAL CAMPAIGN IS IN FULL SWING

¶ 110. (C) Comment: Personalities appear to have triumphed over issues in the EP elections, as most Czechs do not really understand the EP and its relevance to their daily lives. In the end, Czechs voters chose people they know and trust (Tosenovsky being the ultimate example). Many analysts warn that given the nature of the EP elections, this was not as significant a defeat for the CSSD as it has sometimes been portrayed in the press and should not be seen as an accurate forecaster for the October parliamentary elections. Most Czechs are not familiar with the EP's role or influence. Although the EP campaign focused on domestic issues, it failed to link those issues to the EP and its sphere of influence. Czech polling agencies did not conduct exit polling, and it is difficult to determine to what extent CSSD involvement in bringing down the Topolanek government and the two week egg-throwing campaign affected voters.

¶11. (C) Comment (continued): Some public opinion experts argue that this election was a referendum on ODS leader and former Prime Minister Mirek Topolanek and CSSD leader Jiri Paroubek, and Topolanek won. CSSD spent nearly double the amount of money on its campaign (approximately 66 million Kcs) that ODS spent. However, October 2009 could well be a much different story. The economy is still in recession, unemployment, while still low by European standards, is growing, and people are anxious about economic conditions. In four months, campaigns focused on economic issues and what the government can do to help the average person may resonate better with the average voter. CSSD leader Paroubek claims that CSSD continues to be the most popular party in most national polls. The campaign for the EP elections was a precursor to the tough fight the two major parties (ODS and CSSD) will undertake in the October 2009 parliamentary elections. End Comment.

Thompson-Jones